DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 454 200 SP 040 075

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TITLE	Teaming, Supervision and Evaluation: Teacher-Paraeducator Team Perspectives of Their Teaching.
PUB DATE	2001-03-00
NOTE	11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (53rd, Dallas, TX, March 1-4, 2001).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Elementary Secondary Education; *Paraprofessional School Personnel; Personnel Evaluation; Supervision; Teacher Attitudes; Teachers; *Teamwork

ABSTRACT

This study examined perceived advantages and disadvantages of teacher-paraeducator teams, discussing how to enhance the effectiveness of such teams. Focus groups were held with three groups of paraeducators and three groups of teachers from rural and urban schools in Idaho and Utah. Participants shared their views on using a team approach to their work, examining the benefits and disadvantages of working as a team. They also discussed their experiences with supervision and evaluation within the team. While there were some differences between the responses given by the different groups, there were several common themes, including: there are such benefits as increased adult contact, greater individualization of instruction, and exposure to a broader range of methodology; potential disadvantages include the opportunity for students to play one adult against the other; supervision of paraeducators is minimal and largely consists of allocation of students and tasks, and communication about students and tasks is informal and severely limited when teachers and paraeducators do not share the same working space; and evaluation of paraeducators is informal and focuses on student performance and needs rather than paraeducator skills and effectiveness. Most respondents preferred working in teams to working alone. (SM)

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ED 454 200

TEAMING, SUPERVISION AND EVALUATION:

TEACHER-PARAEDUCATOR TEAM PERSPECTIVES OF THEIR TEACHING

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This paper was presented at the AACTE Annual Meeting and Exhibits,
as one of three papers comprising a symposium entitled:
"Paraprofessional staff in education settings: Issues relating to their employment,
training and supervision as they impact teacher education."
March 2001, Dallas, TX

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Teaming, Supervision and Evaluation:

Teacher-paraeducator Team Perspectives of Their Teaching

Introduction

Teachers and paraeducators are frequently assigned to work together in schools and are generally considered to be part of the same instructional team. The precise nature of that working team, however, varies considerably not only between schools but between teams within the same school. This situation arises largely because of the varying job descriptions and responsibilities of paraeducators and teachers, as well as the funding source for the paraeducator's employment. Paraeducators hired through Title I or Special Education funding may work with Resource teachers (in the Resource room or in other classrooms), or with general education teachers (in the general education classroom or on a pull-out basis); Bilingual or English as a Second Language (ESL) paraeducators may work in classrooms or in almost complete isolation with individuals or with small groups of students, even rotating among schools with little or no contact with professional staff.

In an attempt to gain insight into the current workings of teacher-paraeducator teams and into how the effectiveness of these teams might be enhanced, the authors held focus group discussions with three groups of paraeducators and three groups of teachers from a variety of school settings and asked them to share their views on using a team approach to their work. They were also asked what their experience had been with supervision and evaluation within the team.

Method

Focus group discussions were held for each of the three groups. Teachers and paraeducators attended separate focus groups, giving a total of six group discussions. The same questions were asked of each group, the discussion was tape-recorded and later transcribed, and the responses were examined for common themes and trends which emerged. These are the four questions which were presented for open discussion:

1. What do you feel are the benefits of a teacher-paraeducator team approach?
2. What do you feel are the disadvantages of a teacher-paraeducator team approach?
3. [Paraeducator] How does your teacher supervise you?

   [Teacher] How do you supervise your paraeducator?
4. [Paraeducator] How does your teacher evaluate you?

   [Teacher] How do you evaluate your paraeducator?

Participants

Teachers and paraeducators from three school districts took part in this research: a group of 36 from a rural school district in Idaho; a group of 42 from an urban school district in Utah; and a group of 23 from an inner-city Utah school district. For ease of discussion, the groups will be referred to as Rural Idaho, Urban Utah and Inner-City Utah. In each group there were slightly more paraeducators than teachers, as several teachers worked with more than one paraeducator. However, many of the paraeducators also worked with more than one of the teachers in the group. Participants were employed through a variety of funding mechanisms, although the majority worked for Title I and Special Education programs. Years of experience as a teacher or paraeducator ranged from one to approximately twenty, and the majority of participants worked

with elementary age students.

Results

Results for each of the questions discussed the responses are given, with similarities and dissimilarities between groups noted.

Question 1. ***What are the benefits of a teacher-paraeducator team approach?***

Table 1 lists all of the responses given by the groups in answer to this question. There was not a response that was common to all groups. However, the most prevalent themes which emerged were:

- Students have more than one adult to relate to;
- Reduced size of teaching groups allows for greater individualization of instruction; and
- Students are likely to be exposed to and benefit from a broader range of methodology.

Paraeducators and teachers from the same district groups did not generally give the same responses, nor were responses unique to either paraeducators or teachers overall, although there were responses which were unique to a particular discussion group.

Question 2. ***What are the disadvantages of a teacher-paraeducator team approach?***

Table 2 lists all of the responses to this question. There were fewer responses and patterns were less obvious. The salient points are included:

- Two teacher groups (Urban Utah and Inner-city Utah) and one paraeducator group (Rural Idaho) referred to the possibility that students play one adult off against the other.
- Two of the groups of teachers (Rural Idaho and Inner-city Utah) referred to the need for time to plan, supervise and evaluate their paraeducators; the absence of this issue with the

third group of teachers (Urban Utah) may have been due to the fact that few of them worked directly (in the same classroom) with paraeducators

- Several disadvantages were listed with a caveat: *if communication is not good . . . , if adults do not coordinate their efforts well . . . ,* or *if the adults are inconsistent in management and instruction . . .* This suggests that the disadvantages would only be apparent if the necessary precautions and effective teamwork practices were not in place.

In relation to the caveats mentioned above, several perceived causes for lack of effective teamwork also emerged through the discussion. These included: personal egos, teachers not wanting to share responsibility with another adult, and poor communication.

Question 3. ***[Paraeducators] How does your teacher supervise you?***

Table 3 lists all of the responses to this question. The following points emerged:

- All three groups of paraeducators stated that essentially they were not supervised, but rather were allocated students and tasks
- All three groups of paraeducators referred to the fact that those who worked in close physical proximity to the teacher had many opportunities for interaction and that this took the form of mutual feedback
- Two groups of paraeducators (Rural Idaho and Urban Utah) stated that interactions with the teacher focused on the needs of the students not on the paraeducator's skills, and
- One group of paraeducators (Inner-city Utah) strongly emphasized the fact that opportunities for communication were limited for those who did not work together

Question 3. ***[Teachers] How do you supervise your paraeducator?***

- Two groups of teachers (Rural Idaho and Inner-city Utah) stated that supervision was

almost entirely of an informal nature and consisted of conversations about student needs

- Two groups of teachers (Urban Utah and Inner-city Utah) stated that they did not supervise their paraeducators, but rather, allocated students and tasks
- Teachers in the Inner-City Utah group also referred to the importance of making a paraeducator feel comfortable and of value.

There was a great deal of consensus between the groups of teachers and paraeducators, particularly on the informal, task-oriented nature of interactions. Paraeducator groups also emphasized the way in which close physical proximity facilitated regular communication.

Question 4. ***[Paraeducators] How does your teacher evaluate you?***

[Teachers] How do you evaluate your paraeducator?

Table 4 lists all responses to this discussion question. The major points that emerged were:

- Both teachers and paraeducators from the three groups reported that there was no formal evaluation by teachers,
- Both teachers and paraeducators from all three districts reported that evaluation was based on student performance and needs, not paraeducator skills and effectiveness.
- Two paraeducator groups (Urban Utah and Inner-City Utah) and one teacher group (Inner-city Utah) reported that they were required to have an annual evaluation, but this took little time and in some cases was done through discussion between teacher and paraeducator, or by another adult such as the Title I Coordinator for the school
- Two paraeducator groups (Rural Idaho and Inner-city Utah) also referred to the fact that feedback was informally available to them on an as-needed basis, but again this focused on

student instructional objectives rather than paraeducator instructional strategies. Again there was a great deal of consensus between groups.

Summary

Three groups of teacher-paraeducator teams engaged in a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of a team approach, and of how the teachers supervised and evaluated the paraeducators. While there were some differences between the responses given by the different groups, the dominant themes which emerged were these:

- A team approach provides benefits to students in the form of more adult contact, greater individualization of instruction and exposure to a broader range of methodology;
- The potential disadvantage of a team approach includes the opportunity for students to play one adult off against the other, particularly if there are inconsistencies and/or lack of coordination between adults, and that time is required to plan and ensure the effective functioning of the team;
- Supervision of paraeducators is minimal and largely consists of allocation of students and tasks; communication about students and tasks is informal and severely limited where teachers and paraeducators do not share the same working space;
- Evaluation of paraeducators is informal and focuses on student performance and needs, rather than paraeducator skills and effectiveness.

Discussion

There may be few surprises in these data for those who work in classrooms. Data indicate

that paraeducators and teachers seem to be aware of both the benefits and pitfalls of teamwork, although the majority of participants appeared to prefer a team approach rather than working solo. The data also indicate that supervision of paraeducators by the teacher is much more focused on task allocation than on true human resource management - the 'divvying up' of work, rather than a careful matching of helper skills and student needs. Likewise, evaluation is based not on paraeducator performance but on student progress: the link between the effectiveness of the one and the rate of the other seems to be missing entirely. The implications for teacher education are clear. If the benefits of a team approach to teaching are to be fully realized, teachers need the skills to apply what they know about effective instruction of students to their management of paraeducators: paraeducator skills should first be assessed and then systematically developed, with frequent communication between teacher and paraeducator about what the paraeducator is learning and how that learning can be applied in the classroom. Until teachers possess these skills classroom teamwork will not be used to its full potential to benefit the students who most need it.

Table 1.
Responses to Question 1: ***What are the benefits of a teacher-paraeducator team approach?***

Benefits of a teacher-paraeducator team approach
• Students have more than one adult to relate to
• Reduced size of teaching groups allows for individualized instruction
• Students are exposed to a broader range of instructional methodology
• One-on-one instruction more likely to be available to students
• Adults provide a role model of cooperation for students
• More than one adult available to reinforce/explain concepts
• Students are more able to get attention from an adult
• Adults can give each other relief and support
• More ideas can be generated for meeting student needs
• Better transfer of student behavior from one setting to another
• The team as a unit can get to know the students better

Table 2.
Responses to Question *2. What are the disadvantages of a teacher-paraeducator team approach?*

Disadvantages of a teacher-paraeducator team approach
• Students can play one adult off against the other
• The requirement of time for the team for planning, supervision and evaluation
• Student needs may not be met if adults do not coordinate their efforts well
• More than one adult in the classroom distracts some students
• Students can be confused if adults are inconsistent in management/instruction
• If there are several teaching groups students may have to move around
• Roles and expectations may not be clear if communication is not good

Table 3.
Responses to Question 3: ***How does your teacher supervise you?/How do you supervise your paraeducator?***

Teacher and paraeducator perceptions of supervision
• Paraeducator not supervised - allocated students and tasks • Working closely with teacher: lots of interaction, but consists of mutual feedback • Supervision almost entirely informal, consisting of conversations about student needs • Best opportunities for communication occur between those who work together • Supervision focused on student needs not paraeducator teaching skills • Important to help the paraeducator feel comfortable and of value

Table 4.
Responses to Question 4: ***How does your teacher evaluate you? / How do you evaluate your paraeducator?***

Teacher and paraeducator perceptions of evaluation
• Not formally evaluated by teacher on a regular basis • Evaluation based on student performance/needs not paraeducator effectiveness • Formal evaluation at year end only - short time allocation • Feedback available informally on as-needed basis

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